

Interest in Football and Awareness of National Development: A Study Among Female Secondary Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT:

This study explores the relationship between interest levels among female secondary school students in Malaysia and their awareness of the national women's football team. Although women's football has gained global momentum, Malaysia's team remains behind regional counterparts in performance and FIFA rankings, primarily due to limited participation and interest. Focusing on female students at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Meru, this research assesses their interest in football, awareness of the national women's team, and how these factors relate to the sport's development. A quantitative, correlational research design was adopted, using a structured questionnaire covering demographics, football interest, and awareness. Correlation analysis revealed statistically significant results, with all significance (2-tailed) values below .01 or .05. However, the Pearson correlation coefficients ranged from .184 to .226, indicating weak associations. Findings suggest that students generally exhibit low interest and participation in football. Identified barriers include cultural norms, the absence of prominent women's leagues, and limited grassroots development programs. The results highlight the need for collaborative efforts by stakeholders—including parents, educators, and football authorities—to promote female engagement in football and enhance the visibility of the women's game in Malaysia. This study contributes to the existing literature by providing insight into youth perceptions and engagement and offers practical implications for promoting gender inclusivity in sports development. Future initiatives should address systemic challenges and provide greater opportunities for female participation in football.

Keywords: football, interest, awareness

INTRODUCTION

The world continues to be captivated by the ever-evolving landscape of sports, with football emerging as one of the most prominent and widely followed. As Molinaro (2021) highlights, the FIFA World Cup is the largest sporting event globally, reflecting football's unparalleled popularity. This enthusiasm stems from the sport's thrilling dynamics, compelling narratives, and universal appeal, which draw billions of fans across the world. Football is uniquely inclusive, transcending age, gender, and socioeconomic boundaries to unite people from diverse cultures. According to *The Overtake* (2018), football possesses a unifying power that brings together individuals of all ages, races, genders, and nationalities.

Beyond its entertainment value, the controversies and stories surrounding teams, coaches, players, and fans further enhance football's global appeal and prestige. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) plays a central role in maintaining and advancing the sport's standards. FIFA oversees international football by enforcing rules, setting coaching and refereeing standards, regulating global player transfers, and organizing professional leagues and flagship events such as the FIFA World Cup (U.S. Soccer Federation, 2019).

Within this global context, the present study narrows its focus to women's involvement in football and explores how their participation may influence the development and FIFA ranking of the Malaysian women's national football team. This introductory chapter presents the background of the study, outlines the research objectives

and questions, highlights the significance of the research, and identifies the study's limitations.

Background of the Study

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) plays a pivotal role in shaping football development globally. While its historical focus has predominantly been on men's football, FIFA has increasingly recognized the importance of promoting women's participation in the sport. Since officially acknowledging women's football in 1985, FIFA has encouraged each member nation to establish a national women's team under the guidance of their respective football associations.

A major milestone in the global recognition of women's football was achieved in 1991, when FIFA organized the first-ever Women's World Cup in China. According to FIFA (2020), the event featured 12 participating nations and drew large, enthusiastic crowds. The United States emerged as the inaugural champions, marking a significant moment in the sport's history. To further institutionalize the development of women's football, FIFA established the Women's Football Committee (WFC) in 1995. This committee was tasked with addressing strategic issues and driving policy development to support the growth of women's football globally (Women's Football Committee, 2022).

In Malaysia, the foundation of women's football dates back to the 1970s, with matches organized at both state and club levels. The Malaysian women's national team achieved a historic milestone in 1983, securing third place in the AFC Women's Asian Cup. Following FIFA's directive, the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) formally established the national women's team in 1985. Despite these early efforts, Malaysia has struggled to keep pace with regional counterparts such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. Contributing factors include limited financial investment, persistent cultural barriers, and inadequate grassroots development programs. Consequently, the growth of women's football in Malaysia remains slow and uneven compared to global trends.

Statement of the Research Problem

While FIFA continues to monitor and support the global development of women's football, national associations such as the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) must align with these efforts to enhance and sustain the sport locally. Ideally, women's football should flourish within the domestic landscape; however, in Malaysia, it remains largely at an amateur level. According to the FIFA Women's World Rankings (2022), Malaysia is ranked 89th out of 181 participating nations, with a total of 1,252.6 points, reflecting a need for substantial improvement in both performance and development.

Although FAM has initiated leagues and tournaments dedicated to women, these efforts have yet to gain significant traction. As noted by Muhammad Zuhaily Badlishah (2022), "Currently, we only have about 500 registered female players, but our target is 20,000 participants. We need to expand the player pool to identify new talents." This statement highlights a persistent lack of interest and engagement among Malaysian women in football. The consequences of this limited participation are evident in regional competitions such as the AFF Women's Championship, where Malaysia struggles to remain competitive. In contrast, neighboring countries like Thailand have advanced significantly, including qualifying for the FIFA Women's World Cup.

This disparity underscores the urgent need to address declining interest and participation in women's football, which directly affects the national team's future prospects. FAM bears significant responsibility in reversing this trend through strategic interventions. These should include nationwide awareness campaigns to elevate the visibility and value of women's football, alongside the establishment of high-quality domestic leagues and structured talent development pathways. As Badlishah (2022) emphasizes, "Malaysia can achieve success with robust training programs implemented at early stages. Expanding women's leagues nationwide is crucial for talent identification and national team development."

Purpose of The Study

This study aims to assess the level of interest in football among female secondary school students at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Meru, focusing on a specific cohort. The research will categorize participants' interest

levels as high, medium, or low to establish potential correlations with the development of Malaysia's women's football program. The findings will serve two primary objectives: First, to determine whether increased youth engagement could enhance the national team's performance and FIFA ranking. Second, to raise public awareness about the current state of women's football in Malaysia, thereby encouraging collective action to address existing challenges. The underlying hypothesis suggests that greater female participation in football at the grassroots level would likely improve Malaysia's competitive standing internationally. As more young women engage with the sport, the talent pool expands, potentially leading to enhanced team performance and the ability to compete more effectively against other nations.

Research Objectives

This study is undertaken to investigate key aspects related to female students' engagement with football. Specifically, it seeks to assess the level of interest in football among female secondary school students, evaluate their awareness of the development of Malaysia's women's national football team, and examine the relationship between students' interest in football and their awareness of initiatives surrounding the growth of the women's national team.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address several key questions. First, it explores the current level of interest in football among female secondary school students. Second, it examines the extent to which these students are aware of the development of Malaysia's women's national football team. Finally, it investigates whether a relationship exists between students' interest in football and their awareness of the development of the women's national football team.

Significance of the Study

This study underscores the crucial roles of key stakeholders—namely individuals, parents, educators, and officials from the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM)—in fostering the growth of women's football in Malaysia. In the current era, women are increasingly involved in football and exhibit skills, dedication, and responsibilities comparable to those of male players. Encouraging broader female participation may contribute meaningfully to the overall development of the sport at the national level. Parents are instrumental in this process, as their support and understanding can influence their daughters' engagement in football, particularly by recognizing its physical, mental, and character-building benefits. Educators, including teachers and lecturers, also serve as important facilitators by integrating football into school programs and raising awareness among female students.

This research provides a foundation for educators to promote inclusive participation through structured opportunities in physical education. Additionally, the findings call upon FAM officials to intensify their commitment to women's football by establishing high-quality leagues and development pathways that mirror those available to men. Such efforts are essential to identifying emerging talent and legitimizing the women's game within the broader Malaysian football landscape. A collective, multi-stakeholder approach is therefore essential to increasing visibility, participation, and the long-term sustainability of women's football in Malaysia.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample is limited exclusively to female students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Meru, with data collected from a specific cohort. Male students were not included, thereby restricting the generalizability of the findings. The narrow sample size may also contribute to increased sampling error, potentially affecting the accuracy and reliability of the results.

Future research is encouraged to involve a more diverse and larger sample, including both male and female students, to enable comparative analysis and yield more comprehensive insights into football development across genders. Secondly, time constraints posed a challenge during the data collection process. The use of a quantitative approach through questionnaires required a significant number of participants, which proved difficult to manage due to students' academic schedules. Data collection coincided with the researcher's

internship placement at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Meru, further limiting the time available to reach the targeted number of respondents.

Lastly, the accuracy of the data may have been influenced by the level of honesty among respondents. As with most self-reported data, the researcher could not fully verify whether participants responded truthfully to all questions. Any lack of sincerity in responses could compromise the validity of the findings. Addressing these limitations in future studies will enhance the robustness and applicability of research on the development of women's football in Malaysia.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a psychological framework developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), which explains human motivation in terms of the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. According to SDT, individuals are more likely to engage in an activity when these needs are met, fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term participation. In the context of this study, which investigates female students' interest and awareness in football, SDT offers a meaningful lens through which to understand the motivational barriers and facilitators influencing their involvement.

The low levels of interest and participation observed among female students may be attributed to environments that fail to satisfy these psychological needs. For example, the lack of structured development pathways and limited recognition of women's football in Malaysia may hinder the sense of competence among potential female players. Furthermore, societal expectations and gender stereotypes can restrict autonomy, while the absence of peer or community support may limit relatedness. These factors collectively diminish intrinsic motivation, leading to disengagement from the sport.

By applying SDT, this study aims to highlight the importance of designing football programs and policies that support autonomy, build competence, and foster relatedness among young women. Initiatives that meet these psychological needs—such as inclusive coaching practices, increased access to grassroots programs, and greater visibility of female role models—have the potential to enhance motivation and encourage sustained participation. Thus, SDT not only informs the interpretation of the study's findings but also provides a theoretical foundation for practical strategies to advance women's football in Malaysia.

Women's Football from a Global Perspective

The global growth of women's football has been driven by increasing efforts to enhance gender representation in sports. Over the past two decades, numerous countries have introduced structural reforms and investments to elevate women's football to a more professional level. According to FIFPro (2017), the most advanced leagues include Germany's Frauen Bundesliga, France's Division 1 Féminine, England's Women's Super League (WSL), Sweden's Damallsvenskan, and the United States' National Women's Soccer League (NWSL). These leagues have demonstrated professional organization, competitive standards, and substantial fan followings, reflecting broader societal shifts toward the acceptance of women in traditionally male-dominated sports.

However, disparities remain across the global football landscape. While some nations have developed robust professional leagues, others still struggle with limited resources, exposure, and institutional support. Allison (2016) argues that women's football exists within a paradoxical space—experiencing growth at the grassroots level while facing institutional and cultural ceilings at the elite level. This tension highlights the persistent gap between increased female participation and equitable recognition or opportunity in the sport.

Cultural barriers remain one of the most critical challenges facing women's football. Amici (2017) notes that societal attitudes in some regions continue to view football as a male domain, thereby discouraging female participation. These perceptions are deeply embedded in national identities and gender norms, influencing how women's football is supported, promoted, and perceived. As a result, the development of the sport varies greatly across countries, often reflecting broader sociocultural dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Malaysian context, the development of women's football remains at a relatively nascent stage compared to global standards. Despite efforts by the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) to promote women's participation, progress has been limited due to cultural perceptions, infrastructural constraints, and a lack of long-term strategic investment. According to Hassan and Ahmad (2020), public interest in women's football in Malaysia remains low, with limited media coverage and sponsorship opportunities contributing to a lack of visibility and recognition.

Furthermore, gender norms and societal expectations continue to influence the participation of girls and women in sports, often discouraging involvement in physically demanding activities such as football (Ismail et al., 2019). While grassroots programs have been introduced to encourage youth participation, the transition to elite-level competition remains underdeveloped due to the absence of a structured league system and talent development pathways for female athletes. These challenges are compounded by a lack of female role models in the sport, which affects motivation and aspirations among younger players. Consequently, the growth of women's football in Malaysia has been slow, with significant gaps between policy intentions and practical implementation. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts from educational institutions, government bodies, sports organizations, and the wider community to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment for female footballers.

Factors Contributing to the Lack of Interest in Football Among Women

Understanding the lack of interest in football among women requires an examination of the contributing factors. These factors can be categorized as internal—such as personal motivation and confidence—or external, including sociocultural influences, institutional support, and development opportunities. Both types of factors play a critical role in shaping perceptions and engagement levels among women in football, particularly within the Malaysian context.

Development

One of the most influential external factors affecting women's interest in football is the state of development within the sport. According to Roy (2021), in a professional context, development programs are structured sets of milestones and goals designed to be achieved over a specific period. These milestones serve as benchmarks to assess progress toward individual or organizational objectives. In essence, development refers to a strategic process aimed at long-term growth and achievement.

In Malaysia, the development of women's football remains limited and progresses slowly. National governing bodies such as the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports play a crucial role in initiating and sustaining development efforts. Greater commitment from these authorities could enhance public awareness and foster societal support for women's football. As noted by Muhammad Zuhaily Badlishah (2022), Malaysia has the potential to succeed in women's football, provided there are stronger training systems, effective development strategies, and proper preparation.

To strengthen development, initiatives such as organizing grassroots football programs, women-specific clinics, and age-group tournaments are essential. These platforms not only help identify new talent but also nurture interest and enthusiasm among young female players. A key goal of these development efforts is to cultivate long-term engagement and increase women's representation at both national and community levels.

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between the level of interest in football among female secondary school students at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Meru and its potential influence on the performance and perception of Malaysia's women's national football team. The correlational design is appropriate for this research, as it enables the identification and analysis of relationships

between naturally occurring variables without manipulation (McBurney & White, 2009).

The research process involves the selection of a targeted sample, followed by the distribution of a structured questionnaire consisting of items related to demographics, interest in football, and awareness of the national women's team. Respondents are expected to answer the questions sincerely. After data collection, statistical analyses will be conducted to assess the strength and significance of correlations between the variables.

Quantitative Method

Quantitative research involves the systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting of numerical data. As Creswell (2014) notes, quantitative methods are particularly effective when the goal is to generalize findings across larger populations through objective measurement and statistical analysis. This method is chosen for its suitability in identifying measurable patterns and trends. One key advantage is the ability to collect data from a broader sample, thereby enhancing the reliability and generalizability of the results (Mander, 2022). However, quantitative research also has limitations. Errors in research design, bias in data collection, or inaccuracies during execution can compromise the validity of the findings (DeVault, 2020). Therefore, careful planning and methodological rigor are essential to ensure data integrity.

Correlational Research Design

Within the quantitative paradigm, several designs exist, including experimental, survey, and correlational approaches. For this study, a descriptive correlational research design is most appropriate, as it allows the researcher to investigate the statistical relationship between two variables without manipulating them. According to McBurney and White (2009), correlational designs are effective for providing a snapshot of participants' attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions. In this case, the design facilitates the exploration of how female students' interest in football may relate to broader perceptions of women's football performance in Malaysia. The simplicity of correlational research makes it efficient to conduct, as it relies on naturally occurring data. However, its limitations must also be acknowledged. Correlational designs do not establish causality, and inaccurate measurement of variables may lead to misleading conclusions. As such, ensuring clearly defined constructs and valid instruments is crucial to obtaining accurate and meaningful results.

Sample Size

The total female student population at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Meru is approximately 1,696 students, distributed across Form 1 to Form 5. However, this study focuses on a specific academic cohort rather than the entire population. Within the selected batch, there are approximately 339 female students. To determine an appropriate sample size, the researcher referred to the sample size determination table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). According to this reference, a population of 339 requires a minimum of 181 respondents to achieve statistical validity and representativeness.

Therefore, a total of 181 female students from one academic batch at SMK Meru will be selected as the sample for this study. This sample size is considered sufficient to yield reliable findings within the framework of a quantitative, correlational research design.

FINDINGS

Objective 1: To Assess the Level of Interest in Football Among Female Secondary School Students

The first objective was to determine the level of interest in football among female students. According to the descriptive analysis, a large portion of respondents selected "strongly disagree" for statements relating to understanding football (UF), supporting football (SF), and playing football (PF). This indicates a generally low level of interest in football among the respondents. Research shows that, compared to male students, females are statistically more likely to withdraw from sports during adolescence, often due to societal stereotypes and lack of support. These factors can negatively impact self-esteem and interest in sports such as football (Breaking Boundaries: The Rise of Girls-Only Football Training and Its Impact, 2024).

Intan Serah, a national women's football player, has voiced concerns regarding the persistent criticism and objectification faced by women in football, expressing hope for greater community support (Serah, 2022). The data in this study align with her sentiments, as the findings confirm that the level of football interest among girls remains low. However, by addressing societal barriers and fostering inclusive environments, there is potential to nurture stronger interest and boost female participation in football, contributing to improved confidence and broader community support for women in sports.

Objective 2: To Evaluate Awareness of the Development of Malaysia's Women's National Football Team

The second objective focused on assessing students' awareness of the development of the national women's football team. The descriptive analysis revealed that for Items 1 to 4, many respondents selected "strongly disagree," although the percentages suggest that roughly half of the participants were unaware. In contrast, for Item 5, the majority of respondents selected "strongly agree," indicating that some students were aware of the team's performance and FIFA ranking. This awareness appears to be partly influenced by recent initiatives such as the establishment of the National Women's League (NWL).

Youth and Sports Minister Hannah Yeoh emphasized that the NWL has the potential to serve as a turning point for women's football in Malaysia by inspiring young girls to participate (Hannah, 2023). This initiative demonstrates that visibility and structured development pathways can positively influence awareness levels. Increasing the promotion of such efforts may further cultivate interest and support among school-aged girls.

Objective 3: To Examine the Relationship Between Students' Interest in Football and Awareness of National Team Development

The third objective was to determine whether a relationship exists between students' interest in football and their awareness of the women's national football team's development. The correlation analysis showed that all significance values (2-tailed) were below 0.05 and 0.01, indicating statistically significant relationships. However, the Pearson correlation coefficients ranged from 0.184 to 0.226, suggesting a very weak positive correlation between the two variables.

Despite statistical significance, the low correlation indicates that awareness and interest are only weakly associated. This suggests that while students may be aware of the national team, it does not strongly influence their interest in football. Rees et al. (2020) advocate for a more comprehensive approach—combining grassroots engagement with institutional support—to effectively increase both awareness and participation in women's football. Additionally, studies show that exposure to successful female role models can significantly enhance girls' interest in sports. For example, during global events like the FIFA Women's World Cup, increased media coverage and national pride often stimulate youth interest (How Women's National Soccer Teams Are Advocating for Equality, 2023).

In conclusion, although a significant relationship exists between awareness and interest, the weak correlation highlights the need for integrated strategies. These should include early-stage training programs, national campaigns, and increased media coverage to build a supportive environment that encourages greater female participation in football.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, several key recommendations can be proposed to address the low levels of interest and participation in football among female school students and to strengthen the development of women's football in Malaysia.

First, grassroots engagement should be prioritized through the implementation of football clinics and school-level competitions specifically targeting young girls. Rees et al. (2020) assert that early exposure to sport through structured programs significantly increases participation rates and facilitates skill acquisition. Such initiatives can cultivate foundational football skills, enhance exposure to the sport, and spark enthusiasm among young

female players.

In tandem with grassroots efforts, national awareness campaigns should be launched to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes that discourage female participation in football. These campaigns should emphasize the physical, psychological, and social benefits of the sport and highlight the achievements of Malaysia's women footballers. According to Strittmatter et al. (2021), media representations of successful female athletes play a critical role in reshaping public perceptions and fostering greater acceptance of women in sports.

Furthermore, schools should implement professional and structured training programs to close the skill gap and provide talented female students with clear progression pathways. Collaboration with the Football Association of Malaysia (FAM) is necessary to establish elite women's football leagues, modeled after successful men's competitions like the Malaysian Super League. Bradbury et al. (2018) suggest that the development of competitive, high-quality women's leagues enhances visibility and performance by offering regular exposure to high-level matches.

Community and parental involvement is another critical factor. Supportive family environments are essential in encouraging girls to pursue sports such as football. Fredricks and Eccles (2004) highlight that parental encouragement is a strong predictor of sports participation among youth. Community-based initiatives can further help dismantle cultural barriers and promote inclusive environments where girls feel safe and empowered to play.

Additionally, integrating football into school and university physical education curricula for both boys and girls can help normalize female participation and promote gender equality in sport. Hills et al. (2015) found that incorporating football into PE programs increases the likelihood of lifelong engagement, particularly among girls.

Finally, interventions can be designed using the motivational framework provided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Creating environments that fulfill these psychological needs can enhance intrinsic motivation and sustain long-term interest in football among young female participants.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a comprehensive strategy to increase participation, improve performance, and elevate the status of women's football in Malaysia both regionally and globally.

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